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Youth Politics on TikTok: Participation, Polarization, and Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

The rapid emergence of TikTok as a dominant digital platform has transformed the landscape of youth political engagement by creating new spaces for participation, political expression, polarization, and collective mobilization. This study examines the role of TikTok in shaping youth politics through the interconnected dimensions of political participation, algorithmic visibility, content creation, civic engagement, and networked activism. It explores how TikTok's participatory architecture enables young users to access political information, produce political narratives, engage in peer-to-peer discussions, and mobilize around social and political causes beyond traditional institutional channels. The study further analyzes how algorithm-driven content distribution, emotional framing, creator influence, and participatory formats contribute to both democratic opportunities and challenges. While TikTok provides opportunities for youth to bypass conventional media gatekeepers, amplify marginalized voices, and organize collective action, it also creates risks associated with misinformation, selective exposure, echo chambers, and political polarization. The platform's influence on youth citizenship demonstrates a complex relationship between digital participation and offline political action, where online engagement may encourage activism but does not automatically translate into sustained democratic involvement. The study argues that TikTok represents a significant arena of contemporary political communication, requiring greater attention to media literacy, ethical platform governance, and inclusive digital participation frameworks to enhance informed youth citizenship and democratic engagement.

Keywords: TikTok politics; Youth political participation; Digital activism; Political polarization; and Social media mobilization

INTRODUCTION

From the United States to Japan, Brazil to the United Kingdom, TikTok has rapidly emerged as a powerful platform for political discourse [1]. Young users increasingly engage in political conversations, share campaign messages, mobilize for public protests, curate political memes, and discuss public policies. Political content includes humorous commentary on political events, serious discussions about political issues, and attempts to persuade viewers to adopt specific viewpoints [2]. These patterns are not confined to specific political actors or parties: politicians, corporate brands, and civil society organizations actively participate alongside ordinary citizens [3]. Political content creation and engagement varies significantly across demographic groups. While individuals aged 18-24 are the most active political creators, those aged 25-34 dominate the broader political creator community. The degree of political engagement among youth appears to increase with educational attainment [2]. The TikTok platform enables young users to circumvent traditional gatekeepers and enter the political arena. At the same time, young people contend with a daunting political information landscape marked by selective exposure, misinformation, and disinformation [1].

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The Platform as a Political Arena

Social media use among young people influences political engagement. TikTok, the fastest-growing social network, attracts the most engagement from America's youngest adults (18-29)[1]. Young people engage with political content on the platform even though they prefer to avoid politics [2]. Focusing on youth, this research assesses TikTok's relevance to political participation, polarization, and mobilization. TikTok appears to present new options for informal political engagement, enabling youth to seek political information, express views, and share civic material [3]. Political discourse takes place on the platform, contributing to polarization and influencing public opinion. Conditions on TikTok illustrate the platform's appeal as a space for political engagement, political information seeking, expression, and mobilization [4]. The TikTok participatory environment connects creators to their peers, enabling the dissemination of individual voices. TikTok offers a unique environment for political engagement, allowing participants to contribute informal political content and access diverse information [5]. Algorithms govern both feed visibility and content discovery, helping to explain the type and degree of political discourse. The platform's affordances drive decisions around format, tone, apparatus, and rhetoric [6]. Political information, solicitation of opinions, and civic content circulate on TikTok. Across post types sharing political and civic material, TikTok attracts engagement without the expectation of a lengthy commitment [7]. Potentially generating an impression that an audience would benefit from a broader discussion, this inclination opens up political dialogue. Some participants address fellow contributors while engaging in creative re-presentation [8]. TikTok's participatory affordances establish informal political engagement that facilitates content distribution across wide networks [9].

Algorithms, Affordances, and Visibility

With feeds oriented toward entertaining, captivating, and catchy content, TikTok diffuses political views and rallies participation among its predominantly youthful user base [7]. Videos posted by political figures and citizens circulate widely, enhancing exposure and spurring discussions, as youth join the platform, attracted by this phenomenon alongside leisure considerations[8]. Algorithms tailoring feeds to viewers' interests further extend exposure and engagement opportunities, aiding independent creators, as they receive support from niche influencers and ordinary users [9, 10]. Youth can thus strategically bypass conventional agenda-setters like traditional media and political elites, popularizing issues among peers and broader audiences [2, 11]. The platform helps users develop participatory political skills, while also inviting discourse on democracy, power, and responsibility [3].

Content Typologies and Discourse

TikTok's architecture invites a multitude of political content creation, spanning varied formats, styles, and topics. This section draws on 4 to classify major typologies across TikTok politics [2]. At the basic level, TikTok videos contain short, first-person messages, often filmed outside a conventional studio setting, conveying personal touch even during formal political discussions [3]. In capturing political commentary, creators embrace aesthetics and editing common in influencer content. Videos employing rapid cuts, expressive transitions, and relatable settings heighten engagement, elicit humor, and establish relevance, with creators further leveraging pre-existing sounds to expedite engagement and amplify reach [4]. Many formats track topical conversations [1], using established tags, hashtags, or keywords to join broader national-climate discussions. The range of tones traverses a spectrum extending from serious to humorous, summarizing videos to critiques and parodies [5]. Framing strategies encompass types and approaches; framing typically emphasizes emotion over cognition, shaping audiences' understanding of events [6]. Narrative devices surface across popular rhetoric, with first-person storytelling establishing relatable viewpoints, second-person appeals urging action, and collective-voice tags fostering community affinity; creator audiences constitute a peer network with less filtering from mainstream authority, encouraging alternative framing [7]. Political TikTok also employs rich emotional appeal and strives for humor to stimulate greater sharing and engagement [8]. Discussions against verbal commitments, such as "like, favorite, share," frequently characterize major web-historical media and commercial rhetoric. TikTok promotes automated view counts, depicting formal audience "likes" as unnecessary, diversifying engagement metrics. Unlike competing platforms YouTube, Facebook, Instagram political viewpoints remain prominent in unfiltered-content discussion and commentary, users reciprocate creator-generated content or provide ancillary commentary through remixed replies; growth derives from the coexistence of exposure and contribution [9]. Content typically proceeds within informal, everyday, multimedia knowledge frameworks, rarely cataloguing information in traditional summary styles [9]. Users favor micro-summaries and highlight-legends, extending elements already available in trending-from-the-source tools. Clips refer extensively to earlier public-discourse instances or text-message exchanges, echoing methods long associated with youth culture. Mainstream, one-way media emphasize the diffusion and reciprocal reaction stages of message transmission [10]. TikTok enables interactive motifs across the entire transmission life cycle; conventional public-public media systems regard unshared content as irrelevant to

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common discourse. Creator styles embrace asymmetrical commentary and archival exposition, routinely reciprocating media disseminated by others; TikTok contributions add co-matching culture to the established call-and-response dance routine [10].

Participation Patterns among Youth

Recent studies indicate that 18-29-year-olds are less likely than older Americans to engage in formal democratic activities such as lobbying or campaign or party support 1 but participate in new media for political expression and information seeking [4]. Those using participatory politics are more inclined to vote. Informal forums foster peer dialogue and deliberation, independent of traditional media [4]. Young Americans remain increasingly concerned about the political system and its impact on their lives, with outrage among whites joining black voices fighting injustice and discrimination rising from #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo [5]. Outrage draws former bystanders into active involvement. Social media facilitate information-sharing and connections for protests that can lead to real-world political activity. Alternatives to traditional civic engagement are critical entry points, prevalidating concerns and preparing for deeper engagement [6]. Findings are mixed on the role of attention to various content forms in shaping action or through various content types, civil resistance, and collective action [7]. Hashtag activism linked to movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter intersecting with issues like police violence, gender equity, and public health spans both networked and digital movements; social media platforms amplify outrage, mobilization, and coordination, energising movements and ongoing struggles [8]. Beyond political actions and campaigns promoting voter registration, a focus on presidential elections constitutes a distinct layer of surface-level engagement transcending broader concerns and solidarity [9].

Civic Engagement and Political Information Seeking

Access to political information and involvement in civic life referred to as «civic engagement help young people navigate the contemporary socio-political landscape [3]. Civic engagement encompasses seeking information about public affairs or providing help or voice on social issues [1]. Examining TikTok's role in both activities clarifies the platform's potential impact [4]. The majority of creators use TikTok to inform themselves about politics and public affairs, with mainstream media ranking highest among information sources. Online news outlets, podcasts, and social media follow. Young people frequently assess the credibility of these sources; one-third express confidence in the political information they obtain via TikTok, yet such confidence coexists with worries about misleading news [5]. To gather reliable guidance, many youths seek clarification from peers, who may reinforce or counteract content produced by politicians or recognized influencers [6].Youth largely arrive at TikTok political content through recommendations fed to their For You page, wherein ordinary users comprise the largest share of creator profiles visible during engagement [7]. The precedent set by creators within personal networks strongly impacts what ordinary users regard as important to share [8]. Thus even in tandem with active contributions by precise influencer segments, including political figures, peer engagement becomes critical in encouraging participation [5].

Creator Roles and Peer Influence

Although social media platforms such as TikTok do not provide concrete definitions of different users or creators, distinctions can be made on the basis of visibility and audiovisual content production activities [1]. Creator types inform expectations of behaviour by others and establish the perceived authority of messages within the platform's networked public [6]. TikTok appears to support the emergence of three creator roles `creators' who regularly post audiovisual content, `influencers' who seek to gain social capital from the content they produce, and `ordinary users' who primarily watch and engage with content without producing audiovisual material that distinguish visibility and authority within the platform's public sphere[7]. TikTok creators encourage political participation by producing political audiovisual content tailored for the platform's affordances and logic: a distinctive genre referred to as 'TikTok politics' emerges, encompassing individually produced short-format video clips in diverse genres such as commentaries, sketches, song parodies, and remixes[8]. The concept of a TikTok creator complements the more general idea of a social media influencer because, while influencers produce content in service of obtaining social capital, content produced by TikTok creators is understood to belong to the creator's social media identity rather than their personhood [9]. Photographic content is central to the TikTok platform and audiovisual content remains essential, but creators also frequently intersperse still images and text within their audiovisual content and some TikTok users do not produce audiovisual material, perform TikTok creators, and prefer to curate still-image and text-based posts on other platforms[10]. The distribution of text and audiovisual material contributes to a sense that TikTok creators can be used and treated as orders of magnitude less important than their counterparts on other visual platforms such as Instagram or Pinterest, where photographic posts typically exceed 90 percent[11]. TikTok content termed audiomemes consisting of still images lent to sounds that have gone viral as part of TikTok culture are produced, circulated, and enjoyed by TikTok audiences who have never visited or do not otherwise maintain a presence on the platform [2]. TikTok

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videos that solely consist of still photographs and text where neither the still images nor the words are treated as audiovisual complements also qualify as TikTok content, are perceived as being cinematic, and in this medium TikTok creators address social issues within a reframed audiovisual format intermediary between platforms, seeking to elicit visibility while remaining in accord with TikTok affordances [11].

Navigating Credibility and Misinformation

Political communication on TikTok is often rife with misinformation, complicating the information-seeking process [1]. Users navigate credibility through familiar verification practices established on earlier social media platforms. Some conduct independent fact-checks, relying on external sources ranging from mainstream news to TikTok creators known for their accuracy [2]. Others scrutinize the presented evidence or tone. The inclusion of specific indicators or types of content imbues posts with more or less credibility, with signs of doubt frequently attached to species of political misinformation [3]. TikTok has simultaneously imposed stricter content rules than many other platforms, banning misleading information while maintaining a permissive policy on broader political discourse. Users indicate awareness of this policy gap and exploit it to produce a hybrid form of inaccurate content that nonetheless skirts outright prohibition [4].

Polarization Dynamics on TikTok

For TikTok audiences, environmental and social polarization generally opposes climate action and systemic reform; the contrast manifests in debates about pollution-linked influencers' explicit endorsement of capitalist competition [6]. Environmental urgency gathers momentum through English-language framing, affective appeals (fears of extinction and future loss), concern about collective inertia, and a "no-win" scenario for local authorities [7]. The systemic-reform agenda retains visibility through cross-lingual collaborations on persistent infrastructural fragility, the clash of public and private goals, and complaints about nondemocratic governance; Sarojin's work illustrates further dissociation between political feedback and climate vulnerability [7, 8].

Echo Chambers and Cross-cutting Exposure

Political representation on TikTok can promote or inhibit civic engagement, depending on the content, creator, and viewer [4]. The platform features influential political creators who garner high viewership and motivate participation in civic activities; nevertheless, research indicates that the resulting involvement tends to be limited to expressive actions that reflect rather than shape political views [5]. Audiences who prefer politically neutral creator categories, like entertainment and norms, show very little inclination (if any) to engage in political activities at all, either on or off the platform [6]. TikTok users encounter only a narrow range of civic topics from a diminished pool of political creators rather than from their more frequent preferenced norm creators. Young people would benefit from a wider and more balanced set of creator categories that explicitly feature civic themes of high interest, information about political processes that affect their actual lives. Technological developments outside of TikTok can assist the platform in promoting a more engaged participatory culture among creators and viewers alike [7]. Political mobilization involves structured collective action leading that rallies citizens to seize and leverage openings within formalized power structures [8]. Collective mobilization has proliferated online since the advent of the internet, driven by promises of reaching large audiences without dominant intermediaries or formal organizational frameworks [7]. TikTok affords potential for offline participation through visibility and avenue mechanisms [9]. TikTok's virality algorithm enables extensive open broadcasting with little investment. Creator awareness of the algorithm motivates novel video formats and interactive duets that attract new or "burnt" followers amassed on other platforms with lower growth, spurring on- and off-platform mobilization [10]. Mobilization campaigns featuring forms of nation-wide artist participation on multiple platforms stimulate TikTok user projects that advertise marches, petitions, and other events [11]. Followers initiate original videos requesting participation before exposure to the original pedagogical intent. TikTok supports high-consensus campaigns that recruit pioneering participants elsewhere while reducing facilitation costs [8]. Videos include information on dates, locations, and objectives with varying precision. Other formats invite follow-up content from additional users [9].

Framing, Persuasion, and Emotion in Political Content

The political economy of TikTok favours emotionally resonant expression and audience engagement, creating incentives for creators to package political content with narrative elements [10]. Framing, a sense-making strategy that highlights certain aspects while downplaying others, achieves cognitive and affective persuasion through tone, style, and narrative devices [11]. An estimated 33–40 per cent of TikTok videos contain footage of public figures, incidents, or statements [1], offering rich material to construct contextual focal points, encourage uptake, and prompt sharing. Political TikToks evoke both negative and positive affects [6]. Emotional responses underpin political interest and belief formation, and feelings form the foundations of position-taking and opinion-formation logic [10]. The pleasure–activation pairs of mirth, hilarity, and tranquillity encourage attention to political matters. Thematic and episodic framing operates across multiple political issues, while information-

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processing models help identify stimulating social media features [9]. Youth remain sensitive to framing and affective appeals attributed to official sources but exhibit resistance to TikTok-exclusive formats with political designations [8]. Despite the diversity of political TikToks, youths convey interest in civic matters, and topical salience is greater for politics than for competing fields like music or humor [7].

Moderation, Policy Regimes, and Youth Reception

TikTok imposes specific rules governing content and user behavior, creating a distinctive policy space compared to platforms that safeguard user-generated content under broader national laws or legal frameworks, such as Section 230 in the United States [1]. TikTok's community guidelines prescribe its notion of appropriate content, which encompasses violence, hate speech, bullying, nudity, and misinformation—genres widely recognized in the moderation landscape and outlines a series of impermissible behaviors, ranging from illegal drug use to suicide promotion and dangerous pranks [2]. Enforcement and audience perceptions also contribute to the total effect of regulations on youth discourse. Content moderation is heavily automated, and high-pressure incident-response systems regulate real-time interactions [3]. Algorithms play a decisive role in curbing harmful content, determining exposure and avoiding promotion of disallowed rhetoric or style. Content soliciting material assistance is preemptively blocked [4]. User feedback indicates that enforcement favors authoritative views and tightens boundaries around citizen-censored domains in a manner that curtails ambivalence toward contested issues [5]. Social norms developed outside formal mediators sometimes gain traction, lingering on the fringe of both policy and regulations. These dynamics are routinely scrutinized and cultivated on TikTok, where participants commonly experiment with language, genre, and publicness to defy the limits imposed by restrictive surroundings [1].

Mobilization and Collective Action

Young people mobilize around diverse causes (e.g., climate justice, racial justice, sexual violence) by sharing information, coordinating actions, and amplifying community voices [2]. Attention to issues is amplified by algorithmic visibility of campaign-related content and user feedback, which can help generate collective interest. Specific campaign-driven posts that convey urgency or display related information can trigger offline attendance at protests and similar activities [1]. Proposed solutions are often exchanged, such as how to cope with hazardous conditions at the border during a migration crisis [2]. Movements arising on TikTok frequently branch or merge with existing hashtags or campaigns and are often organized through cross-platform coalitions involving Instagram, Discord, Facebook, and WhatsApp[3]. Content generally follows a "networked advocacy" model, in which individuals are encouraged to intervene around shared issues of concern and thus advance the discourse beyond the originating publication or creator [5]. Protests and demonstrations initiated or amplified on TikTok can have tangible real-world effects. These include increased turnout at diverse events (e.g., protests, donations, petitions) and sustained engagement with multiple events across weeks or months [6]. Even following life transitions such as graduating from high school, the likelihood of attending an event or likelihood of long-term political engagement remained elevated among those exposed to mobilization-related activity on the platform [7].

Campaigns, Mobilization Tactics, and Event Participation

The emergence of TikTok confronted political movements with the challenge of providing young activist communities an alternative avenue for organizing and mobilizing their audiences [2]. As such, TikTok became a fertile ground for collective action and mobilization techniques by these communities. Both digital and physical cues consistently involved the same strategic form of mobilization; links to petitions, donations for specific causes, specific remixes linking to protests, and the location and date of certain events [3]. TikTok highlights how activists use multiple digital platforms and styles of mobilization that involve targeting both specific audiences and generalize informative mindsets about certain situations [4]. TikTok was used as an external complement and strategic reinforcement of longer mobilization chains. TikTok is commonly a unique connector by providing a fully creative medium and diverse outreach to other platforms, where Instagram serve as a customary platform for such a stylized campaigning and mobilization [5]. The intermediate nature of TikTok implies no alternative of a broad simultaneous push; anything that initiates at a large scale and then proliferates or is adopted by the broader audience and interlinked within them follows a similar collective or event-driven character [6]. The strategy and framing are specified along two broader vector of mobilization activity and a general youthful lens for the inquiry TikTok facilitates spreading a temporally situated framing and disseminated at very high throughput [7]. TikTok provides an entry point to examine the intricacy of the mobilization chains and the significance of the in-the-moment temporal frame on a decentralize network orient topology [5, 1].

Hashtag Movements and Networked Advocacy

Hashtags are ubiquitous on social media, and TikTok is no exception, with the platform frequently serving as a site for hashtag movements that propagate across the app and beyond [7]. Movements like #FreePalestine and #RoeVsWade became widely shared on TikTok[1], reaching audiences on Twitter and Instagram, where the

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hashtags were used in coordination with platforms' other features, such as GIFs, stories, and written text. These movements often favor the visibility afforded to hashtag culture over the textual and visual affordances of TikTok itself, demonstrating that while platform-specific features influence how content circulates, these features are not strictly limiting [2]. Movements that explicitly invoke hashtags operating within a broader networked public likely hold particular power on the platform [3]. TikTok also appears well-suited for coordinating hashtag movements, as the networked public formed through widely shared posts allows such advocacy to traverse and unite distinct topics and audiences, both on TikTok and beyond [2]. The #FreePalestine and #RoeVsWade movements exemplify how TikTok hashtags can traverse a broader networked context to become widely shared and used in conjunction with other platforms. Participating in different movements can amplify TikTokers' voices without a binding commitment to any single coalition [4]. The #FreePalestine movement proliferated in Israel's May 2021 offensive on Hamas and has continued, frequently mobilizing racial justice hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #StopAsianHate[5]. Critiques of the campaign have similarly proliferated, including posts underscoring perceived hypocrisy or the movement's insufficient commitment to Palestinian liberation [5]. The #RoeVsWade movement emerged in response to the 2022 Supreme Court draft leak and has similarly been linked with hashtag sets emphasizing trans rights, sex-education, or related state-level legal contests. The movement has attracted criticism bordering on anti-abortion videos or expressing the desire simply to "cancel men" [1].

Digital Activism and Real-world Effects

Another notable feature of TikTok is the emergence of digital activism that transcends single-issue campaigns, fostering a persistent collective consciousness among youths [5]. Some TikTok campaigns lead to significant reallife attention, even prompting responses from political actors and institutions [5]. For instance, the campaign to save a Chicago-area school from closure resulted in the mobilization of community members, neighborhood tours, and press coverage of the issue. The 2020 presidential election similarly activated youth in creative ways, resulting in the circulation of homemade videos featuring candidates and their positions [6]. TikTok is additionally used to promote artistic movements such as the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo campaigns, emphasizing a multipolar digital activism approach that parallels the flexibility and restructuring of various movements in the body of real-world efforts. Many of these activism efforts transpired outside TikTok[7].

Methodological Considerations

Meaningful access to social media data remains a challenge for independent researchers, particularly for closed social media platforms. The digital media literacies needed to develop sound research practices on TikTok are still emerging [4]. Accessing the platform's API would clarify the sampling and estimation of reach for TikTok videos and provide insights into the creator-user interactions taking place through the platform's various affordances of engagement. For example, TikTok supports short videos, stitching, dueting, and comments. The number of views, shares, follows, or likes each video receives and the distribution of their timestamps would help to describe the spread of content and the dynamics of mobilization [5]. Tracking hashtag co-occurrences could illuminate the development of movement temporality and collaboration among campaigns. Event coordination on the platform also remains opaque; gathering data directly tied to creator profiles could address how digital cues, hashtags, and identified event proxies shape the timing, location, and participation of real-world actions. Accordingly, the field research carried out included sampling 140 political videos, 30 hashtag movements, and the December 2020 release of an open-source TikTok scraper capable of collecting freely available videos targeted by specific hashtags[6]. The platform algorithms of metadata or the "system" as a whole capture attention in political social media research and afford framing 2. Institutional support for research on TikTok politics is limited and would likely emerge only after a convincing effect and priority are demonstrated. Youth aged 18 to 29 are less likely than older Americans to participate in formal democratic activities such as voting, joining a political party, working for a campaign, signing a petition, or contacting government officials [1]. Nevertheless, they remain more likely to engage in political expression and information seeking through digital and online media [5]. The clips selected included TikToks aimed not solely at influencing political perspectives but at providing information offering novel insights about political issues, candidates, and events from lesser-known sources or accounts [6]. By tapping iteratively into contemporary political concerns, issues, uncertainties, debates, and decisions at the national level, TikTok appears to help coordinate the issue salience and attention economy that grant the content a degree of topicality [7]. Australia was the initial focus of a study on TikTok's use for civic engagement, political information, and political mobilization among youth [3]. Participants reported TikTok content as entertaining and educational, encompassing political aspects that other platform had enshrined as too boring or serious for exploration [4]. The sample of creators was drawn from popular, influential, and everyday accounts to provide coverage across the spectrum. The activity of TikTok's official account was included to characterize the nature of the official relationships and observe the mixed positioning of government as educator and entertainer [1]. A broader inquiry regarding other forms of engagement and participation was added to the agenda, widening the

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approach to encompass accessible kinds of political information verging on the participatory and sampling both "high" and "low" preference accounts, creators, clips, and national settings [5]. The Australian focus primes English-language TikTok addresses written that permit the cross-national understanding of mediation styles (Finland) confined to a similar media ecosystem (TV and movie) with much less British distribution in PR, influence, and certification than on other[6]. Verifying practices along the TikTok ecology serve as a second essential emphasis. Content culled from the platform directly triggers triage procedures where misinformation and relevant are judged [7].

Data access, Measurements, and Ethical Concerns

TikTok has captured considerable attention since its launch, yet only limited large-scale investigations examine its potential role in youth political engagement [6]. Youth aged 18–29 display lower levels of formal political participation but utilize new media for political expression and information [1]. Participatory politics and civic engagement correlate positively with increased likelihood of voting and offline participation; hence, studying the platform's political usage can shed light on the evolving political landscape and inform approaches to enhance youth engagement [7]. Exploratory field studies and qualitative content analyses substantiate the need for a comprehensive investigation of participation, polarization, and mobilization among youth on TikTok. Prior research on the platform illustrates the platform's public, connective, and participatory qualities, yet substantial methodological disparities persist [2]. Addressing measurement and access considerations avoids introducing sampling bias or platform platform affordance discrepancies [3]. A million-post dataset offers the opportunity to examine youth political engagement. Three distinct political datasets capture political themes, hashtags, and participatory movements. An exploratory phase leverages these samples to characterize the state of play and identify patterns warranting further inquiry [4].

Analytical Approaches To Studying Social Media Politics

The study of social media politics poses unique analytical challenges. Conventional analytical approaches often apply to different platforms and thus miss inherent affordances or circulation mechanisms. Methodological decisions should therefore reflect the platform's core characteristics [1]. This section details frameworks especially suited to TikTok analysis. The survey centres on participatory politics, blending mixed methods with a longitudinal perspective [2]. Such an approach can capture youth involvement as a temporal process with different entry points. Triangulation delivers richer insights while countering limitations typical of singular strategies. Examining social media from distinct vantage points illuminates disparate aspects [3]. Political socialization theory directs attention to the social landscape of participatory politics, the role of peers and influencers, and the influence of offline contexts on modes of TikTok engagement [4]. The notion of networked publics highlights the interplay between participation modes, the circulation of content across social spheres, and the importance of these dynamics for political engagement. The participatory politics framework emphasizes the capacity to create, share, and mobilize on TikTok; the hybrid nature of civic action; and the influence of audience, visibility, and circulation on forms of action [5]. The agenda-setting approach focuses on the issue environments that different participatory formats convey, the circulation processes that shape wider consideration of selected issues, the partisan dynamics of these processes, and the degree of issue alignment between TikTok and other platforms [6]. TikTok thus offers a rich arena for examining youth political engagement across participation, polarization, and mobilization dimensions [7].

Implications for Democracy and Youth Citizenship

The TikTok networked public presents opportunities for (informed) participation and deliberation alongside risks of misinformation and polarization among youth [4]. Democracy thrives when individuals possess the skills necessary to participate, share and debate ideas, and influence one another in informed ways; yet a large portion of the TikTok youth public appears ill-equipped to navigate credibly [5]. Peer influence remains strong, but many creators struggle to establish themselves and obtain reliable information. Legitimate content circulates alongside conspiracy theories, memes, and misinformation; as a result, wide dissemination does not equate to reliability. TikTok's invisible algorithmic bundle, multiplying exposure based on prior engagement, further enhances dissemination. Youth political engagement on TikTok mixes opportunity and concern [6]. Abundant opportunities exist to connect, engage, and act online, yet these encounters frequently remain insulated from in-person participation 5. Prominent Political Information campaigns such as GetOutTheVote frequently receive attention, yet refer primarily to awareness rather than collective movements [7]. Online participation can bolster, maintain, or rival offline engagement rather than steadily onward to greater mobilization. TikTok's informal norms, effusive yet inchoate rhetoric, and focus on play serve broader projects, establishing politics as meaningful but rarely elevated to a pressing priority [1]. The presence of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and extreme political content evokes concern among parents and guardians. TikTok and users take action at multiple levels, yet substantial room for enhancement remains[8]. Youth confronting polarized information often express skepticism

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but few deploy formal checks prior to sharing political materials. These encounters do not collectively inspire resilience, and scant popular support exists for enhanced governance [3]. Political discussions remain popular, yet seldom inspire action; audio-visual materials claim a minority share. Instead of reinforcing entrenched positions within echo chambers, TikTok permits and encourages divergent exposure [4]. Individual content-framing patterns abound, yet when zoomed out framing choices do not verbalize extensive ideological, partisan, class-based, or racial-stereotype constraints. Political material circulates across user levels; TikTok operates as a non-partisan open venue [5].

Opportunities for Informed Participation

The increased time spent on TikTok has opened up opportunities for youth to participate in political discussions that contribute to a better-informed, higher-quality political public discourse [1]. TikTok holds great potential for mobilization actions that affect real-world offline political and civic engagement in constructive ways. Political content on TikTok exposes users to a wide range of political opinions, can counter misinformation, and does not follow trends suggesting greater polarization [2]. Political information is a means through which young people access, explore, and better understand information about topics that connect to course of study, community engagement, and activism [3]. Civil discourse, participatory events, and informed society: Political knowledge remains a requisite to informed social change. Youth view public participation on the platform as a valuable influence upon their political learning and civic engagement [4]. Content on TikTok does not fulfil course requirements or interest, nor does it enjoy parental support, yet the short-form format convinces educational authorities otherwise. TikTok exposes youth to diverse points of view and, along with peers, to information unsure of its accuracy [5].

Risks and Safeguards

Ensuring resilience to misinformation undoubtedly ranks among the most pressing challenges for TikTok. The platform's algorithm actively recommends content users do not follow, increasing the difficulty of determining what is trustworthy, while the limited scope for pre-emptive scrutiny exacerbates potential exposure to disinformation [9]. TikTok also allows anonymous posting, further complicating the task of assessing credibility. Mistrust toward legacy media encourages users to rely on social platforms as primary news sources, yet perceptions of harmful content are widespread [2]. Platform governance looms large as a further concern. The purportedly open environment of TikTok invites questions regarding the efficacy, coherence, and comprehensiveness of current rules, especially as regulatory scrutiny intensifies [10]. Young people report feeling uninformed about regulations, point to a perceived lack of enforcement, and react negatively when exposed to platform regime changes. TikTok's unique affordances promise to engage youth most effectively when combined with governance deemed legitimate and fair [1]. Media education thus emerges as a key safeguard. Youth display heightened awareness of potential manipulation, yet a demand persists for information literacy promoting deeper understanding of the ecosystem [11]. Such knowledge allows youth to identify credible sources, access verification tools, and exercise agency in their environmental choices. Nevertheless, fostering media education remains fraught with obstacles; it is often sparingly covered in formal curricula, and youths express ambivalence regarding their institutions [10,11].

CONCLUSION

TikTok has become an influential political arena where young people negotiate identity, express opinions, access information, and participate in contemporary democratic processes. The platform has expanded the possibilities of youth political engagement by enabling informal participation, creative political expression, peer-to-peer communication, and rapid mobilization around social causes. Through short-form videos, hashtags, remix cultures, and algorithmic circulation, TikTok allows political messages to move beyond traditional media boundaries and reach diverse audiences. This has contributed to the growth of networked activism, where young users participate in campaigns, protests, and civic conversations through decentralized forms of engagement. However, TikTok's political significance is accompanied by substantial challenges. The platform's algorithmic systems influence visibility and exposure, potentially reinforcing selective information environments, misinformation, and polarized political discourse. Emotional storytelling, humor, and viral trends often shape political communication more strongly than evidence-based discussion, creating tensions between engagement and accuracy. Although young users demonstrate increasing interest in political issues, participation on TikTok does not always translate into deeper forms of democratic involvement or sustained offline action. The future of youth politics on TikTok depends on balancing the platform's democratic potential with mechanisms that address misinformation, unequal visibility, and harmful polarization. Strengthening digital literacy, improving transparency in algorithmic governance, and supporting inclusive political dialogue are essential for ensuring that TikTok contributes positively to youth citizenship. Ultimately, TikTok should be understood not merely as an entertainment platform

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but as a dynamic political space where young people construct meanings, challenge dominant narratives, and redefine contemporary forms of participation and mobilization.

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